



[KATHLEEN NEELY IS]
A NATURAL STORYTELLER
~CHRISTY AWARD WINNER,
KRISTEN HEITZMANN

KATHLEEN NEELY
THE STREET
Singer

THINGS TO
REMEMBER

The Street
Singer

Kathleen Neely

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The Street Singer

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Dedication

To Brian, Stephen, and Darren
I loved having three sons, and I'm so proud of the men
you have become.

Prologue

There was magic in the grooves. Every disk looked the same, but the grooves made all the difference. Each fashioned for distinctiveness of sound. Trisha held two black vinyl disks to the light, trying to see the variance. Pap's eyes flickered with amusement as she puzzled over the grooves. His raspy voice called to her. "Little girls need to learn how to dance." With that, Pap chose the album, pulled the disk from the cardboard cover, removed the paper sleeve, and placed it on the phonograph with the care of fragile glass. "Adaline. Now there's a lady that can sing."

The soft tinkling sounds of a piano, high on the keyboard, entered first. The soft hum of the brass joined them next, followed by the thump of percussion commanding a steady beat. Then Adaline's gentle tones tiptoed into the living room, as if testing their welcome.

Pap stretched his hand toward her. "May I have this dance?" He angled into a slight bow. Trisha stepped into the circle of his arm and rested her right hand in his work-worn left, her left hand touching the shoulder of a flannel shirt, leaving space between them for propriety.

"You know, I taught your mama to dance in this very room. She was about your age. Your Grandma

watched us, calling out directions." He exhaled a deep, sad sigh. Grandma wasn't watching today. Trisha hungered for memories of her mom, but they always made Grandma cry.

"Shoulders straight. Don't watch your feet." Pap danced with smooth and practiced fluidity. As they danced, he murmured cues to Trisha. "Right foot, left foot, side step, back." Soon she no longer needed the cues. Miss Adaline's voice grew in crescendo, its richness filling the room with sound until it penetrated deep inside her.

When the end of the song came, Pap dipped her while she laughed, keeping hold throughout the eternity of the last note. *Just call me Baby. Baby.* How could anyone hold their breath that long and then close it with perfect pitch? Only Miss Adaline.

1

Trisha had way too much to do, but Julie practically dragged her to the ice cream parlor anyway.

"You need to take a break. Everything goes better with a cool, creamy gelato."

Trisha shook her head. "How do you stay so skinny?"

"I burn it off at the gym." Julie did a couple high-step jogs to demonstrate.

They ordered and sat across from each other at a round table as bright sunlight spilled through the glass windows.

Trisha rubbed her neck to ease the tension, twisting it from side to side to get a good stretch. "I'm so overwhelmed right now. This final semester has been intense, and the bar exam is looming closer all the time. But all I can think about is the mess at Pap's house. There's so much to clean out."

Julie's eyes softened. "It's only been a week since his funeral. Give yourself a little time."

Trisha tasted the cool lemon flavor of her sorbet. "I really want to have it done before the wedding."

"You couldn't have anticipated this. Your Grandpa wasn't in bad health."

"No, but he just shut down after Grandma died. I think he couldn't take one more loss."

"How about your uncle? Will he help with the house?"

"Uncle Brendan?" Trisha shook her head. "I doubt it. I think he's still upset that they left me the house."

"But you said they evened things out with other assets. He probably got the better end of the deal. You get an old house in ill repair and the task of disposing of it."

Trisha gave a mock smile. "Well, thanks for cheering me up."

"You have Grant to help you. Four months 'til the wedding. That's plenty of time to take care of your grandpa's place."

Trisha tilted her head up. "Grant? He's not exactly the roll-up-your-sleeves kind of guy. He's more inclined toward 'call a disaster relief service, and I'll write the check.' Maybe it'll come to that." She crumpled her napkin and put it in her empty bowl. "For some stupid reason, I thought one month after graduation would be a great time to get married."

"Honey, you're marrying Grant Ramsey. Anytime would be a good time to marry that man."

The tension eased and the corners of her lips lifted into the slightest grin. "You're right, Jules. I need to relax and enjoy the anticipation."

"Let's attack that house this weekend. I can gather about a half-dozen friends, and we'll tear through it in no time." She snapped her fingers rapid fire.

Trisha shook her head. "I'm not ready for other people to tear through there. I need to see what I'm dealing with first. But I'll take you up on your offer. And this weekend works. But Jules, I have to warn you, it's not pretty. My grandparents were pack rats. They could've been featured on one of those hoarding shows."

"That bad, huh?"

“You have no idea.”

~*~

Trisha turned left toward her grandparents' home—or what had been their home before it became hers two weeks ago. The sparse gravel and lack of rain brought a billow of dust when the tires hit the driveway. Now she'd have to add “carwash” to her to-do list.

“It's a mess, Julie. I'm almost ashamed to take anyone in there, but I do need your help.” She shrugged her shoulders but kept her eyes on the winding drive.

“I'm no stranger to work. We'll roll up our sleeves and have it done by the end of the week.” She rubbed her palms together like this would be an adventure. When Trisha picked her up this morning, she came out wearing patched jeans, a flannel shirt with a variety of paint colors, and a bandana on her head. She grasped the handle of a bin with paper towels, rags, disinfectant, and window cleaner. A grocery store tote bag filled with snacks swung from her arm.

Trisha gaped at the load. “I told you I'd order lunch and have it delivered.”

“Humph. You think I can make it 'til lunch without eating? Just a healthy little bag of chips, cookies, and doughnut holes. Oh, and a little, bitty one-pound package of to-die-for peppermint bark.”

Trisha gasped in disbelief. “I don't know how you can eat like that.”

“Well, you'll know as soon as we get working and break into the stash. It's actually pretty easy.” To prove

her point, she pulled out a doughnut hole and popped it into her mouth.

The two-story house came into view. Why hadn't they downsized? Trish had only suggested it hundreds of times. A cynical answer sprang to her mind—*because then they would have had this chore instead of me.*

The house sat on three acres of overgrown grass, untrimmed shrubbery, and about forty large oak trees. Trisha glanced up at the new leaves welcoming spring. She thought about fall when the assault would come, filling this yard with dead leaves and acorns. Her eighty-seven-year-old grandpa had still planned to rake them. Every fall for two months, he used a wooden-handled rake, picked a small section of yard, pulled them into a pile at the far end of the property, and set them on fire. Then he repeated the process day after day until green peeked through the single layer of dead brown leaves remaining. At that point, he abandoned the task and allowed them to rot on the ground. Would the house be sold by then, or would that job be hers?

He mowed the lawn in much the same way. Three acres and no riding mower. He walked his push mower over a section at a time, starting with a rectangular square to mark the invisible boundaries he had chosen that day. Then he mowed from the outer boundary to the center, each day choosing a different spot until all three acres had been mown. By then, the original place towered so high it was time to start over.

"Wow. Big house." Julie stared before retrieving her supplies.

Trisha reached over and relieved Julie of the bag. "You know, it only looks that way. It's tall because some of the basement is out of the ground, ceilings are

high, and there's an attic where we can stand upright—which is a good thing because it's full."

Trisha started toward the side door that entered the summer room off of the kitchen. Julie scanned all of the supplies they had to carry and pointed toward the front door, raising her eyes in question. "That door's closer."

Trisha shook her head. "Porch boards are rotten. It's not safe. Pap didn't worry about it since he always used the back."

Julie's mouth gaped open. "Shouldn't it be cordoned off? What if someone comes to the door and gets hurt?"

Trisha gave her a sad smile. "That's what I asked Pap."

They walked into the kitchen and set all the supplies on the table.

Julie looked around at the dated appliances, the rounded white surface of a refrigerator door with the tiny freezer tucked on the inside, the six-burner gas range laden heavy with grease. The linoleum flooring squares didn't always line up, and the chrome table legs had pitted over the years.

"This isn't so bad. Old but quaint. Feels kind of homey."

Trisha took a deep breath. "That's because I already did the kitchen. I couldn't leave food and dirty dishes. Believe me. It was nasty."

Julie ran her fingers over an antiquated, embroidered dishtowel. "Give him a little slack, Trishie. He must have missed your grandma so much."

"I know, but I also know it wasn't much different when she lived. Now, if you're ready, brace yourself and take a walk into the living room."

Julie went first and, before Trisha reached the doorway, she heard laughter.

"Are you kidding me? He must have just done this. Maybe he started packing to downsize and didn't tell you."

They stood and perused boxes on top of boxes. Lamps and knickknacks cluttered the tables until there was barely any wood visible.

"Five years ago? That's a slow-mo downsize."

Julie shook her head in disbelief. "Tell me where to start and what to do with the stuff?"

"Most of it will be discarded, but I can't dump a box and assume there's nothing of importance. I'll take the ones beside the desk. They're most likely to be important papers. Just pick a spot. Or, better yet, clear all of the knickknacks. Anything you like, take it. Everything else on the tables and shelves can be tossed away." She glanced around the room as she spoke. "Except this." Trisha picked up an antique bud vase with tiny pink flowers. "I always did like this piece."

"What about your uncle? Will he want anything?"

Trisha narrowed her eyes. "Do you see him here helping? Toss them."

An hour into cleaning, the stash of snacks had been opened and consumed. Trisha and Julie sorted through boxes and loaded them into the car to take to the shredding facility. They could see tabletops again, the surfaces cleared of all clutter.

Julie had a little packrat in her, too. She kept a few items and boxed the rest for donation to a resale store.

Trisha uncovered a deep box filled with old vinyl records. "I remember these. Pap loved his music. He used to play them when I was a little girl. Technology's come a long way. I remember the skipping and

scratching. Oh, and sometimes it would get stuck and play the same line over and over. Pap's trick was to put a penny on the arm of the needle and weigh it down."

Julie came over and knelt beside the box as they leafed through the stack. "Does he have an old phonograph? These albums might be valuable."

"Somewhere. You don't think he would have thrown it out, do you?"

"It'll surface. If we try them, we can see which ones still play well and sort them to sell."

Trisha crossed her arms. "Are you crazy? There's got to be over a hundred of these. Do you know how long it would take to test each one?"

Julie held both arms out, palms up. "Just trying to be helpful."

She went back to sorting table drawers and boxes for donating. Trisha sat cross-legged on the floor, pulling records out as memories sparked to life. A smile crossed her face as her vision shifted from the stubborn old man that died to the grandfather who raised her.

"We danced the Polka to this one. He said every girl needed to learn to dance. Oh, and this one he used before my first high school dance. He said I'd waltz like Ginger Rogers by the night of the dance."

She fingered the album covers, lost in memories of her grandfather swinging her around the small space and counting out loud to help her remember where to place her feet. Flipping through the vinyls, she pulled one out and stared.

"This was my favorite." The lady on the cover had always mesmerized Trisha. Her singing held mourning, deep and sorrowful, a longing in each note as though she sang directly to Trisha's heart.

"A lot of black singers performed jazz or gospel, but Adaline sang ballads. She could capture an emotion like no one I ever heard."

Trisha dug through the box, certain there were others by Adaline. She pulled out two more records. Scanning the songs, she closed her eyes and remembered...so many feelings, so many years ago.

"I wonder what Adaline is doing now."

Julie called over her shoulder. "If she's alive."

"I guess it's possible she's not, but she's pretty young here. I can't find a date."

Julie rolled her eyes. "It's a vinyl record. That ought'a tell you something." She carried a box to the car. When she walked back into the living room, she clutched a large carton in both arms, a conspiratorial smile on her face. "Wanna guess what I found?"

"Montgomery Ward catalogs? Newspapers from 1945? Last month's dirty dishes?"

"No, but those first two would be pretty cool to find. Close your eyes."

Trisha shot her an impatient look. "Just show me!"

"Close them or no more peppermint bark."

She obeyed and heard the rustling sound as Julie emptied the box.

"OK. Open."

With the pride of a fisherman showing his catch, Julie held the old phonograph in her extended arms.

It took only a few minutes to clear the dust and discover it still worked. Soon they sat listening to Adaline crooning about a love lost. Had the tones always been this scratchy? How would Adaline sound on today's advanced technology? Yet even through the grainy sound, deep emotion drifted into the room. Trisha closed her eyes and listened in hushed stillness.

She was a teenager again, singing into a makeshift microphone that doubled as a hairbrush, doing her best to mimic Adaline's pensive tones.

The mood in the room became subdued. Trisha was contented to rest in the quiet for a few more moments, but Julie's abrupt movement broke the hypnotic spell. "Time to order lunch." She reached over and lifted the needle from the phonograph as if she couldn't bear the sadness.

Four hours later, they called it a day. They would deliver some boxes to the resale store and some to the dump. Trisha set her last two boxes on the step and dug in her handbag for the correct key to lock up. She would take the vinyl records home with her, not certain why. She wouldn't keep them long term, but so much of Pap lived in the music he loved.

Julie took a box to the car and then returned to help. Trisha heard a gasp and turned. Julie held the top album and stared at Adaline's picture. Adaline posed, slender in a royal-blue, close-fitting gown covered with sequins, bronze skin glowing beneath the close-shorn hair. Her face tilted sideways, gazing at something outside of the album's perimeter.

"Trisha, I know her!"

"Adaline? She was famous in her day, but you're a little young for that. I only know her because of Pap."

Julie shook her head. "No. I mean, I know her! She's the street singer over on the east side. Crawford Street area. She sings for the crowds and has a box to collect donations."

Trisha shook her head. "No, Jules. Can't be. First of all, I doubt she was from around here. Second, she'd be pretty old by now." She reached for the album cover. "I'm sure she doesn't look like this anymore."

Julie's crooked finger tapped the picture, unwavering. "She doesn't look like that anymore, but it's her. She's not as thin and her hair is longer and graying, but it's her." Her hands went to her hips. "Trust me. You don't forget those eyes."

Trisha tilted the album and searched the eyes, as if they'd tell her the truth. "No, I don't imagine those eyes would be easy to forget. But what in the world are you doing over in that area?"

"Walking through that area when I'm going from work to my sister's cuts off a few blocks. I never do it at night. You know, she can still gather a crowd. Sometimes I'll see six or more people just standing, listening."

Trisha stared, contemplating the possibility. Then, with great care, she placed the album back in the box. She turned her key to lock the door, hoisted the box to her hip, and walked to the car. She would have to make a trip to Crawford Street.

2

On her last birthday, Grant told Trisha dressy attire was in order and left the rest a surprise. He arrived in a chauffeured limousine that took them to an airstrip, and then a chartered plane whisked them off to New York City for dinner and a Broadway show.

That evening in New York, Grant proposed, and she accepted. A fairy-tale evening, perfect in every detail, until the show ended.

As the crowds began to disperse, Grant suggested they relax and wait until the people thinned out. In their seats, he leaned in and pulled her close. He stroked her cheek, his face close to hers.

Trisha brushed his lips with hers. "Thank you for such a nice surprise. It's been a perfect evening."

"You're welcome, but it's not over. I took the liberty of reserving us a room. I know you didn't pack, but we don't need much. The Piper Cub will be ready in the morning."

Trisha pulled back. "Grant, we've had this conversation. You know what I want."

With gentleness, he pulled her back, lifted her left hand, and tapped her ring finger where the 1.5 carat diamond rested. "Doesn't this make a difference? You know I love you."

She placed a soft kiss on his lips. "Then be patient. Please."

He lifted one eyebrow and spoke with a steady

tone. "Trish, I've been patient. It's time."

"Grant, I want our—"

"It's time," he repeated it with authority.

Trisha stiffened. "It's not time until the time is right for both of us. Do I need to return this?" She began to remove the glimmering jewel.

"Stop it." He raised his voice and enclosed his hand over hers. Then he softened his tone. "Honey, that's not what I meant."

Trisha stopped removing the ring but looked him square in the eye. "I don't think I've misunderstood any of this conversation. We've talked about this."

Grant ran his hands through his hair, the cut so precise each hair retreated back into place. He pulled his cell phone from a pocket and hit a few keys.

"Can you have the aircraft ready tonight? We're heading back home."

After a few aloof days and some conversation, Grant came to terms with Trisha's desire to wait until the wedding night. She compromised by agreeing to schedule the wedding for an earlier date.

~*~

Trisha and Grant reserved Saturdays as their date night. He always found someplace special for dinner. It provided an evening of respite from classes, studying, and errands. They ate dinner, lingering and catching up on the week past. With their schedules so full, sometimes that was all the time they had.

The glass pillar in the center of the table held a single candle with rivulets of wax melting down the side. Trisha loved dripping candles. They held a story,

lit and burning for so many different reasons. Whether happy or sad, a sweet aroma drifted into each story.

Grant took her hand, running his finger over the diamond she wore. He did that often. He had been raised with affluence, but she had never owned anything this valuable.

The candle flickered as the waiter cleared the table and refilled their wine glasses. Grant ordered crème brûlée without asking. He knew how Trisha loved it. The subtle lighting and soft music provided a perfect backdrop for romance. But their busy schedules left them little time together, and there were things they needed to talk about. He leaned back and crossed his legs at the ankle.

“So what’s the status of the house? I have a realtor friend who will come to list it. The sooner we get it on the market, the sooner you can focus on what’s important.”

Trisha rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t believe it. I’ve only touched the surface. You know how much clutter they had.”

“Honey, this is way too much distraction. Why don’t you let me take care of it? I can have it emptied in a day.”

“No. I know how you’d empty it. You’d order a dumpster and a crew of workers, list it ‘as is,’ and be done with it.”

“You have to admit, that’s not a bad plan. Tax liability should be better if it’s sold before the wedding.”

The waiter arrived with their crème brûlée. He placed ramekins filled with the creamy custard on the table before them. Trisha’s spoon pierced the crusted, brown topping to reach the cool crème beneath.

"No, I have to do it myself. Once I find what's important, it will go faster."

Grant twirled his wine, sniffed, and took a sip. "Your grandfather had all his important papers in the safe deposit box along with the will. That should be all you need."

She placed her elbows on the table, entwined her fingers, and rested her chin on them. Leaning forward, she locked her gaze with his. "If this were your parents' home, would you hire someone to discard everything and arrange a quick sale?"

Grant shifted, crossing his leg over his knee. "That's different."

"Why?"

"Come on, Trish. You know there's nothing of value there. My parents have an art collection, valuable antiques, things you don't toss out."

She shook her head. "Take off your financial hat for a change. My life is in that house. They have things my mother made and pictures of her and my dad. That's all I have left of them. Things I can't reduce to a dollar value."

He took her hand in his. "You're right, honey. I don't mean to dismiss that. I'm worried about you. You can only stretch yourself so far." He lifted her hand to his lips. "I love you, Trish. You know that, don't you?"

She stroked his face with the hand he had lifted. "I know. I love you, too. This is a season in life I have to walk through. It will be over soon." Her eyes misted. "You know, I miss him so much. He called me his princess."

Grant leaned in close. "You're my princess now."



Trisha stood, stretched, and looked at Chester, his tiger stripes designed with precision. Curled across the back of the sofa, his whiskers twitched as she rubbed the top of his sleeping head. “Chester, maybe you can sleep, but I have to get out of this apartment for a while.”

Sliding her feet into her shoes, Trisha reached for her keys and phone. As she headed to the door for a brief walk, she saw the box of albums that she had pushed into a corner. Stepping past them every day kept Adaline fresh in her mind. Could she be the street singer Julie saw? It didn’t seem possible, but this just became the perfect time to find out.

Heading into the city, she set her GPS to Crawford Street. She could probably find it herself, but she’d better not take the chance of getting lost. Turning a bend, the Asheville skyline materialized before her, always a pleasant sight. While much smaller than big cities, it boasted a double skyline—cities in the forefront, mountains as a backdrop.

She approached Crawford Street, an older ethnic neighborhood. Some attempts had been made at revitalization, but it still fell short of attracting new residents.

Trisha turned left onto Crawford Street. Julie hadn’t told her what intersection, but it had to be this one—Julie probably traveled this way from her workplace to her sister’s home. She slowed the car as she scanned the sidewalk.

The Mendino apartment building sat back from the road, providing more depth for the sidewalk—a wide triangular walkway fronting the corner entrance.